

# Synopsis

Spain, 1519

## Act I

SCENE 1 In the mountains of Aragon

SCENE 2 Elvira's apartments in Silva's castle

## *Intermission*

## Act II

Silva's castle

## *Intermission*

## Act III

Aachen, Germany

## *Pause*

## Act IV

Ernani's castle in Saragossa, Spain

---

## *Act I The Bandit*

Spain, 1519. Don Juan of Aragon has lost his title and wealth during a civil war. Taking the name Ernani, he leads a band of outlaws in the mountains. He tells his men of his love for Elvira and his daring plan to rescue her from an impending forced marriage to her uncle, Don Ruy Gómez de Silva. The men, eager for action, set out with Ernani for Silva's castle.

As Elvira waits for Ernani in her room, she is visited by Don Carlo, the King of Spain. He declares his love but then tries to abduct her, and she grabs a knife in self-defense. Ernani bursts in. The king recognizes him as the notorious outlaw and taunts him with insults. The men are about to duel when Silva comes into the room. He is shocked to discover Elvira with two strangers and threatens them both. When a messenger reveals the king's true identity, Silva asks for forgiveness, which Carlo grants. He needs Silva's support in the election for the new Holy Roman Emperor. The king dismisses Ernani, who is angry but leaves at Elvira's urging, vowing revenge.

## *Act II The Guest*

In Silva's castle, preparations are underway for the marriage of Elvira and Silva. Ernani arrives, disguised as a pilgrim. When Elvira enters in her bridal dress, Ernani throws off his cloak and offers his head—which has a price on it—as a

# Synopsis

wedding gift. Elvira, briefly left alone with her lover, assures him that she would rather kill herself than marry someone else. When Silva returns, he is furious to find the couple embracing. But at the arrival of the king, Silva hides Ernani so that he can take revenge on the outlaw later. Carlo accuses Silva of concealing a criminal, but the old man refuses to turn Ernani in and offers his own life as forfeit. When Elvira enters to ask the king for mercy, he takes her away as a hostage. Silva challenges Ernani to a duel and is astonished when Ernani reveals that Carlo is also a suitor for Elvira's hand. The two agree to suspend their quarrel to take vengeance against the king. Once they have done so, Ernani says, his life will be in Silva's hands. As a pledge, Ernani gives Silva a hunting horn: when it is sounded, Ernani will kill himself. Silva agrees and calls his men in pursuit of Carlo.

## *Act III Clemency*

At Charlemagne's tomb in Aachen, Carlo is waiting for the electors' choice of the next Holy Roman Emperor. He thinks about the futility of wealth and power and vows to rule wisely if chosen. As a group of conspirators led by Ernani and Silva gathers to plan his assassination, he hides inside the tomb. Ernani is chosen as the one to kill the king, and the men look forward to a better future for Spain. When cannon shots announce that Carlo has been elected emperor, he emerges from his hiding place and orders the conspirators to be punished. The nobles are to be executed, the commoners imprisoned. Ernani reveals his true identity and demands to share the fate of the other noblemen. Elvira again pleads for his life. Addressing himself to the spirit of Charlemagne, the new emperor pardons the conspirators and agrees to the marriage of Ernani and Elvira.

## *Act IV The Mask*

At his palace in Saragossa, Ernani is celebrating his upcoming marriage to Elvira. A horn sounds in the distance, interrupting a brief moment alone for the happy couple. The horn announces Silva, who enters demanding that Ernani fulfill his oath. Sending the terrified Elvira away, Ernani confronts his rival and pleads for a moment of happiness at the end of his miserable life. Elvira returns as Silva hands Ernani a knife and demands the life that has been promised to him.

## In Focus

*Giuseppe Verdi*

# Ernani

---

*Premiere: La Fenice, Venice, 1844*

This dynamic opera is a prime example of the melodic and dramatic vigor that made the reputation of the young Giuseppe Verdi. *Ernani* is based on a scandalous drama by Victor Hugo, its title character an outlaw with a greater sense of honor than the many nobles and royals around him. The story is loaded with outlandish situations and unlikely coincidence. In lieu of the traditional love triangle, this drama presents a young woman contending with three would-be lovers: Ernani, a magisterial nobleman, and another even nobler man, the king of Spain, who later becomes Holy Roman Emperor. This extreme, anti-realistic tale encouraged Verdi to create a score of relentless urgency that whipped contemporary audiences into a collective frenzy. After its initial triumph, *Ernani*, like other early Verdi successes such as *Nabucco*, was overshadowed by the composer's later masterpieces. Recently, audiences have learned to cherish these earlier operas for their own unique qualities and rediscover their vitality.

### *The Creators*

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) was born in the province of Parma near the town of Busseto and composed 28 operas in a career spanning six decades. *Ernani* was his fifth stage work and the third in a series of huge successes beginning with *Nabucco*. *Ernani* marks Verdi's first collaboration with librettist Francesco Maria Piave (1810–1876), who would go on to pen the text for some of his later masterworks, including *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*. In 1842 Piave became performance director at Venice's Fenice Theater, and while critics generally expressed a less than favorable view of his poetic talents, there is no question that his theatrical instincts inspired some of Verdi's best work. The libretto is based on the play *Hernani* (1830) by Victor Hugo (1802–1885), the French dramatist, political figure, theorist, and author of *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.

### *The Setting*

*Ernani* is set in 16th-century Spain, with a quick excursion (in Act III) to Aachen in Germany. Such a change of setting within an opera or play was contrary to classical notions of unity, but a favorite technique of dramatists in the Romantic Era to depict a disordered world where extreme emotions were the norm.

## In Focus

### *The Music*

The score of *Ernani* makes ample use of two musical devices that would mark Verdi's long career: galloping rhythm and long outpourings of melody. The rhythmic exuberance grows throughout the opera and reaches its peak in the short final act. The stately and dynamic moods in the opera are frequently contrasted with each other, such as in the tenor's opening arias—the first elegant and beautiful, the second rollicking and heroic. The soprano introduces herself with the famous "Ernani, involami." It features trills and runs like other early 19th-century arias, but this piece is anchored in difficult low notes that add dramatic heft. The orchestra generally provides rhythmic propulsion rather than symphonic detail, though touches of solo instruments often highlight the vocal line, as the bass clarinet, clarinets, and bassoons do in the introduction to the baritone's ravishing Act III aria. The chorus is used sparingly but effectively, most notably in the Act III "Se ridesti il Leon," one of the rousing, patriotic numbers that helped make Verdi an Italian icon. The chorus figures in what may be the most impressive scene of the opera: the ensemble at the end of the third act. The tenor, soprano, and chorus surround the baritone voice in rolling cascades of lyricism. It is an enthralling example of Italian opera at its best.

### *Ernani at the Met*

*Ernani* was first performed at the Met in 1903 with a cast led by Marcella Sembrich, Emilio De Marchi, Antonio Scotti, and Edouard de Reszke. The production fell out of the repertory after four performances. A new production in 1921, with sets designed by Joseph Urban, fared better with audiences, with Gennaro Papi conducting Giovanni Martinelli and the sensational American soprano Rosa Ponselle. Ponselle and Martinelli repeated their success 17 times together throughout the 1920s, but the opera left the repertory again at the end of the decade. A new production in 1956, coinciding with a general mid-century rediscovery of Verdi's earlier works, did much to bring the work into the mainstream once more: Dimitri Mitropoulos conducted a wonderful cast headed by Mario Del Monaco, Zinka Milanov, Leonard Warren, and Cesare Siepi. The comprimario tenor role of Don Riccardo was sung by James McCracken seven years before his arrival at the Met as a leading tenor. The production was revived in 1962 with Thomas Schippers conducting Franco Corelli, Leontyne Price, Cornell MacNeil, and Jerome Hines. Another revival opened the 1970 season, with Schippers conducting Carlo Bergonzi, Martina Arroyo, Sherrill Milnes, and Ruggero Raimondi in his Met debut. James Levine led the later new production of *Ernani* at its 1983 premiere, which was also telecast, with Milnes and Raimondi repeating their roles and the leads sung by Luciano Pavarotti and Leona Mitchell. It was most recently revived in the 2011–12 season.

## Program Note

With *Ernani*, the fifth of his 28 operas, Verdi was able to exercise a degree of control over the creative process that had been unprecedented thus far in his career. Not only did he enjoy one of the key successes of his early years as a result, but the experience also helped clarify his sense of the untapped potential for a powerful new style of music drama hidden behind the conventions of Italian opera.

Embarking on his first commission for the Teatro la Fenice in Venice—all of his preceding four operas had been premiered at La Scala's larger house in Milan—Verdi changed his mind several times about the subject for the new work. Among those he toyed with were the figures of the medieval tribune Rienzi and Oliver Cromwell (the latter using a plot likely cribbed from a Walter Scott novel), Byron's *The Two Foscari* (which would become the source for his sixth opera), and even *King Lear*. At last, in the fall of 1843, Verdi found himself fixated on Victor Hugo's landmark drama *Hernani, ou l'Honneur Castillan*. He immediately honed in on the pivotal scenes he intuited should be condensed from the lengthy play. "Here is proof that Verdi's highly synthetic imagination concentrated above all else on the linking of a number of fundamental situations," writes opera historian Gilles de Van.

Detailed instructions to Verdi's librettist as to how to parse the drama into musical units signaled the increasingly interventionist role the composer was claiming as a creative necessity. Meanwhile, Verdi had aggressively negotiated a contract with La Fenice's management that gave him full responsibility for the libretto, even securing the right to choose singers himself from among those scheduled to appear with the company that season. "Verdi's desire to take charge of every aspect of an opera," according to de Van, "implied that he had the power to decide what weight to give the text and the music, respectively, depending on the 'moments' of the action."

The librettist in this instance was Francesco Maria Piave (1810–1876), a former seminarian from a Venetian family, with whom Verdi had agreed to collaborate for the first time. Though a few years older than the composer, the poet was essentially unknown and had precious little theatrical experience. But Verdi turned this to his advantage, treating his colleague as a sounding board for his own ideas about how to maximize dramatic effectiveness. As the domineering partner, Verdi even had Piave set aside the Cromwell libretto they had previously agreed on so as to start afresh with the *Ernani* project.

Correspondence between composer and poet laid out some fundamental aesthetic rules as guideposts for the style of opera Verdi was evolving: above all, these rules placed a premium on brevity and compression. When Piave indirectly voiced complaints to another friend over the many sudden changes of structure and detail the composer demanded, Verdi explained that he was simply drawing on his experience as an avid theatergoer who pays careful attention to

## Program Note

what the public wants. "I've been able to put my finger on so many works which wouldn't have failed if the pieces had been better laid out, the effects better calculated, the musical forms clearer, etc.," declared Verdi. However vexatious Piave may have found their collaboration, it would continue on and off for nearly two decades.

Verdi's lifelong preoccupation with Shakespeare would take concrete form for the first time a few years down the road when, again enlisting (and bullying) Piave, he composed *Macbeth*, widely recognized as a major turning point in his early career. But the work of Victor Hugo likewise helped Verdi find his voice both times he brought it to the opera stage, in *Ernani* and *Rigoletto*—even if George Bernard Shaw mischievously overstated the case, quipping that "the chief glory of Victor Hugo as a stage poet was to have provided libretti for Verdi."

In fact, Hugo's work "as a stage poet" (including the controversial, quasi-Shavian prefaces he published to accompany his plays) did have an enormous impact not just on the theater of the era but on the artistic worldview of Romanticism. The five-act *Hernani* brought to the stage the Shakespeare-flavored Romantic aesthetic advocated by Hugo to replace the artificial unities and order of Classicism. Its mix of raw emotion and revolutionary politics famously triggered a riot when the play opened in Paris in 1830.

Verdi wasn't the first to sense *Hernani's* suitability for opera. An operatic treatment had already appeared in Paris as early as 1834. Bellini seriously considered the idea but was dissuaded on account of difficulty with the censors, opting for *La Sonnambula* instead. (Verdi and Piave got away with having to make remarkably few and minor concessions to the Venetian censors.) Yet what long ago seemed so revolutionary about the play's scenario of hotheaded, youthful passion clashing fatally with antiquated codes of honor has become, to contemporary audiences, absurdly overwrought melodrama. And the Risorgimento-tinged political factors understood in Verdi's day—the main plot, after all, shows an old, irrelevant order (represented by Silva) destroying the legitimate happiness of a young couple seeking to be united—no longer resonate.

Still, the streamlined version of *Hernani* that captivated Verdi provided an ideal vehicle through which to explore a new sense of dramatic momentum—all while still working within the general framework of conventional opera, with its entrance arias, cabalettas, and ensemble finales. Even in the opening scene (the most conventional part of the opera, which introduces material not found in Hugo), Verdi conveys a brash energy that is the thumbprint of the score overall and that anticipates the dark urgency of *Il Trovatore*. The driving, syncopated rhythms that characterize the lovers Ernani and Elvira in their first-act trio with Don Carlo represent this urgency's clearest expression, but the sheer abundance of melodic ideas throughout also points to the opera's fundamentally dynamic

nature. This lyrical overflow serves as a kind of shortcut to alter the mood as rapidly as needed.

At the same time, Verdi artfully links separate units into longer spans so that musical forms convincingly mirror the dramatic progression. The confrontation between Silva (the old generation) and the lovers in the second act, for example, enfolds the opera's only love duet within a larger trio. Nowhere is Verdi's large-scale design and dramatic efficiency more effective than in the masterful compression of the third act. Here we start with the gloomy low-woodwind tone painting of the prelude and the solitary communing of Don Carlo but arrive at a luminous ensemble conclusion; along the way, Verdi's music has tracked the conversion of roué king to magnanimous ruler. This sudden opening into an epic sphere makes the return to the drama of private vendettas, which clinches the final act, feel all the more claustrophobic.

Most remarkable of all is how clearly Verdi translates the drama into operatic terms. Many a commentator has wryly noted that *Ernani's* basic conflict could also be described as a battle among vocal ranges, with tenor, baritone, and bass vying for the soprano, though it is an instrument—with cruel irony, a horn—that is the victor. (Thanks to the composer's say in choosing his singers, he was able to veto an original plan that would have cast the hero as a breeches role for alto.)

But behind the humorous formula lies a significant insight about Verdi's use of voice archetypes to establish character. Julian Budden, whose analyses remain an inexhaustible source of insight into the composer's oeuvre, writes that *Ernani* "is built out of the clash" of male vocal archetypes. Between two extremes—a kind of lyrical heroism embodied by the tenor versus the immovable, archaic, "monochrome" force of the bass, Silva—stands the baritone, Don Carlo, "partaking of both natures." It is the Verdi baritone who will become "the greatest vehicle of power in Italian opera"—and indeed we glimpse future snatches of such complex figures as King Philip and Simon Boccanegra in Verdi's music for Don Carlo, the only character in *Ernani* who actually changes.

Verdi lived a pattern of distracting illnesses and intense mood swings, both of which accompanied the composition of *Ernani*. He even threatened to "blow [his] brains out" at one point if the premiere failed with the picky Venetian audience. Despite a mediocre first night, however, *Ernani* was recognized at once as a success and spread the composer's fame internationally. This was Verdi's second opera to be staged in the United States, reaching New York as early as 1847.

—Thomas May